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4 Things to Know about Reading

by Libby Duggan

Parents often ask me what they can do at home to support and encourage reading. I find myself repeating four main ideas, things that reading workshop teachers know that every parent, grandparent, babysitter, school volunteer, policymaker — well, everyone — should know, too.

1. We use multiple strategies to figure out difficult words.

As adult readers, we use many strategies to decipher words that are unfamiliar to us, but because reading is second nature to us -- like breathing, perhaps -- we may not even be aware of the thinking we do. As a result, we often get caught in the trap of telling young children to "sound it out" when they encounter a new word. Instead, we want children to have a "toolbox" of many strategies for comprehension. In addition to encouraging kids to sound out a word, you can demonstrate other ways of determining a word's meaning, things seasoned readers do almost subconsciously when they read, such as:

- Look at the pictures. Do they help?
- Look for familiar roots or small words within the word you're trying to identify.
- Based on what you know from the text and pictures, think of words that would make sense and/or sound right in the sentence. Do the letters of any words you thought of seem to match what you see on the page?
- Skip the word you don't know and read to the end of the sentence. Then come back to

the word. How does what you know now help you decipher the word?

2. We read best when we're interested in what we're reading.

This is why it is important for children to have a *choice* about what they read. Think about your own reading life, for example. Imagine being told that you have to read a science fiction novel if your preference is biographies. Your reading of the science fiction novel would be very different than your reading of a book about the life of a famous actor. Teachers, parents and caregivers can help children become better readers by helping them find books and magazines that tap into their interests.

3. Reading is a social experience.

When children are young and haven't developed the ability to read on their own, we read aloud to them and talk about the pictures and stories. But once children become independent readers, we often encourage them to read quietly alone. Older children and adults can enjoy hearing a story aloud, too (why else would audio books still exist?), and all readers need time to talk about what they are reading to develop deeper understandings of it. Adults and children can participate in discussions about books together, as if having your own cross-generational book club. Book discussions at home among children are

great, too, just like in the classroom.

4. Seeing readers and books inspires reading.

Like all of us, children tend to take on the habits of those around them, so seeing adults and other children reading is important. There are many things you can do as a reading role model for children, including:

- Take frequent trips to the neighborhood library to check out books for yourself and your child.
- Talk about books that you are reading (or newspaper and magazine articles) with your child and other adults. Let children see that reading and talking about texts is part of your lifestyle.
- Read during your leisure time. Make an intentional effort to swap some family "screen time" (television, computers) for book time.
- Make a place for books and other reading material in your home. If books and reading material are out of sight, they will be out of mind as well.

Libby Duggan is program manager and workshop coach for the Indiana Partnership for Young Writers. For more information and resources, visit www.indianayoungwriters.org.

